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SUNKEN MONUMENTS: NOTES ON *BEDIL* OF RESISTANCE

Charles Leary¹, Anna Durin and Candida Jau Emang

Although the enemy ran off in haste, they had time to hide many things of value: but our Dyaks allowed no leaf to pass unturned; and at a place in the river where I had been sitting and bathing for hours to-day, along with hundreds of Malays, I was surprised to see, towards the evening, a few Dyaks come to take their last luck before retiring after their day's work: when lo! And behold, they traced a small line to a twig, and brought up a large brass gun. Such is their quickness of vision; only Dyaks can kill Dyaks.

- Charles Brooke, *Ten Years in Sarawak* (1866)

The above passage from the diaries of the then Tuan Muda (and later second Rajah of Sarawak), describing an evening repose during his 1856 expedition against the Ibans of Julau, illustrates the aura and allure of the desired object of the cannon for the Iban of Sarawak, in addition to being a significant weapon during the conflicts of this period. At the same time, the Tuan Muda's remarks reveal a certain tendency of these heavy instruments to find themselves sinking underwater in Sarawak's rivers - while the scene of uncanny detection also somehow allows Brooke to conclude that indeed, "only Dyaks can kill Dyaks," as the Rajah James Brooke enlisted Iban tribes in war against those Iban tribes not yet agreeable to his government, expanding the domain of Sarawak and the scope of his rule.

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Today, a replica of a more famous cannon sits atop the peak of Bukit Sadok, in tribute to one of the more storied Iban rebels, Rentap, who held out for four years against repeated attacks from Charles Brooke (and his own 12-pound *Bujang Sadok* cannon) from 1857 to 1861. This replica is of the so-called *Bujang Timpang Berang*, the famous ‘one-armed cannon’ which achieved its own praise-name of sorts, its name originating as – according to stories still told – one side of its trunnion, or mounting, broke after the rattan used to pull it up the 900-metre high mountain fortress snapped. Another story tells that *Bujang Timpang Berang* was being carried up the mountain by a strong man in the company named Japar, and that after carrying it by himself

through difficult terrain, it dropped from his shoulder upon reaching a slippery narrow passage near the peak.² The cannon that Brooke himself used in his last expedition at Sadok now sits at the entrance of the Dewan Tun Abdul Razak of the Sarawak Museum. As for *Bujang Timpang Berang*, Brooke spiked it after finally breaching Rentap's defences on his third attempt in 1861. It remained there for almost 65 years until being brought down the mountain to Buloh Antu, and then deposited with the Betong district office in 1926, upon which the *Sarawak Gazette* reported, "it was probably the most famous piece of ordinance in Sarawak legend and it was scarcely fitting that so famous a gun should lie corroding and forgotten". The original now resides at the entrance of the Betong District Office, as artefact and monument of Sarawak history. But what exactly, or who, does it memorialise, and monumentalise – and can other cannons serve a similar function? Now over 150 years later, there also may be other cannons from this engagement still lying in various places underwater in muddy rivers. *Bujang Timpang Berang* was actually one of at least four cannons intended for use against Brooke forces, given to Aji and his group by the anti-Brooke conspirator Sharif Masahor, but it was the only one that made the complete arduous journey across land, water, and up the mountain. While the rivers that hold them become murkier, so perhaps do the memories of them, but what stories remain about these cannons, about the warriors that possessed them, and what is their potential for monumentality?

The story of *Bujang Timpang Berang* and three *bedil* (cannon) left behind can serve as a frame of reference for the larger history of resistance and struggle in Sarawak, and remembering the past, especially as, in addition, cannons bear the weight of local history as heirlooms and play a large role in Iban cultural life and the Iban *adat* (customary law). But how does one define the conflict involving these *bedil*? By historical period? By war expedition? The principal players are, aside from Rentap, of course James and Charles Brooke, Sharif Masahor, and Aji, Nanang, and Luyoh, sons of the Iban paramount chief Orang Kaya Pemancha Dana, while the principal staging ground is the Saribas area, in the present day Betong Division. At the same time, alliances in the conflict were constantly shifting. Aji was at one time allied with Brooke, Nanang later assented to Brooke rule and fought with Charles Brooke, Masahor was attempting to orchestrate various attacks against European presence in Sarawak while at times also serving in the Brooke administration. Sharif Masahor, for example, likely played a role in the killing of two British officers, Henry Steele and Charles Fox, at Kanowit in 1859.³ Nanang and Luyoh supported the defence of Sharif Masahor at Igan in 1861, before the final Sadok expedition.

The Brooke government ascribed the term rebels, but these figures were not always rebels *per se*, nor was there any united native or ethnic front against Brooke. It is difficult to define the conflict strictly by enemies or sides, as these were constantly shifting.

There is substantial literature on the history of this conflict – for example, one can consult Robert Pringle's *Rajahs and Rebels: The Ibans of Sarawak under Brooke Rule* – but a brief note on the war chieftain Aji and the Sadok expeditions which brought this moment to its climax is in order. In part due to his dramatic and defiant stand against the Brooke administration atop Bukit Sadok, Rentap's name may be more recognizable among the general population of Sarawak as well as visitors, but some of his contemporaries, higher ranked in the military hierarchy, are more heralded in *ensera* (epic poems), *renong* (song), *pengap* (deity invocation at *gawai* or festivals), and wedding speeches that form Iban oral tradition – particularly the sons of Orang Kaya Pemancha Dana: Luyoh, Nanang, and especially Aji, who succeeded his father as chief of the Layar region with the highest warrior rank of *Tau Serang*.⁴ These warriors all engaged at one time in resistance against Brunei and Brooke rule over Sarawak. Although Dana had eventually acquiesced to Brooke rule, his sons still engaged in fighting in the Saribas area. The brothers Aji, Nanang, and Luyoh embarked on the journey to Sadok bringing cannon supplied by Sharif Masahor, and in this revered campaign, one cannon was damaged while others were lost. There is no definitive account of this journey available, and perhaps this may be just a footnote to a larger story. The information here is collected from various sources, both written sources and discussions with local inhabitants and descendants.

Mapping *Bedil*

There is some dispute among historians regarding the origins of the *Bujang Timpang Berang*. The markings on the original *Bujang Timpang Berang* read 1515. The lack of decorative ornament could suggest that it may not have been made in Brunei, and then instead could be of European origin. Benedict Sandin offers the more popular account that Rentap acquired the cannon from Dana, who captured it during a 1834 raid of the Sambas area in what is now the Indonesian state of West Kalimantan (1994: 167). In Charles Brooke's memoirs, he notes that upon finding the gun (with the markings of the year 1515) atop Sadok, he was told it belonged to Nanang, given to him by his father (151). But following an alternate theory by Langgu in his book